New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1952

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1952 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres in Other Years

Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

1951 Vol.

Stage Play	*Page*
Antony and Cleopatra	132
Bagels and Yox	238
Caesar and Cleopatra	135
Constant Wife (The)	149
Don Juan in Hell	193
*Fourposter (The)	190
Gigi	159
Glad Tidings	212
I Am a Camera	156
*King and I (The)	304
Legend of Lovers	125
Lo and Behold!	143
*Moon Is Blue (The)	322
Nina	152
Number (The)	186
Paint Your Wagon	172
*Point of No Return	140
Remains To Be Seen	223
Saint Joan	220
Stalag 17	274
*Top Banana	180
Two on the Aisle	246
Wild Duck (The)	128

1950 Vol.

Affairs of State	267
Call Me Madam	243
*Guys and Dolls	185

1949 Vol.

*South Pacific	312

1948 Vol.

Kiss Me, Kate (return engagement)	91

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of September 15, 1952*

1952 PRODUCTIONS
Reviews Appear in This Volume
Premieres During 1952

Stage Play	*Page*
Anna Christie	395
Brass Ring (The)	319
Candida	307
"Charles Dickens"	371
Chase (The)	315
Collector's Item	368
Come of Age	382
Dear Barbarians	356
Desire Under the Elms	386
Fancy Meeting You Again	392
First Lady	273
Flight Into Egypt	341
Four Saints in Three Acts	312
Gertie	379
Golden Boy	344
Grass Harp (The)	328
Hook 'n Ladder	300
Jane	376
Long Watch (The)	335
*Male Animal (The)	297
*Mrs. McThing	359
Much Ado About Nothing	294
*New Faces of 1952	278
Of Thee I Sing	289
One Bright Day	338
*Pal Joey	398
Paris '90	348
*Seagulls Over Sorrento	262
Shrike (The)	389
Shuffle Along	286
Sunday Breakfast	270
Three Wishes for Jamie	332
To Be Continued	304
Tovarich	281
Venus Observed	364
*Wish You Were Here	266
Women of Twilight	351
CRITICS' CIRCLE AWARD	322

Theatre Openings

"Seagulls Over Sorrento"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of September 15, 1952*

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Seagulls Over Sorrento"

The New York Times

September 12, 1952

'Seagulls Over Sorrento,' Comedy by Hugh Hastings, Launches New Theatrical Season Here

By BROOKS ATKINSON

On the basis of its favorable record across the seas, Hugh Hastings' comedy about the British Navy, "Seagulls Over Sorrento," has the distinction of opening the new season. It was put on at the John Golden last evening by a task force of able actors. Since "Bagels and Yox" opened last year's season with some of the most tasteless skylarking of the century, we are already a little ahead this year.

But it is obvious that we are going to run into familiar troubles right at the beginning of the season. For "Seagulls Over Sorrento" is hardly more than a routine service broadside. Food, girls, gallantry, loyalty, discipline and feuds with a tyrannical petty officer are the principal ingredients; Mr. Hastings has stirred them up in a rough-and-ready style. There is one moment of nobility to about ten of stout, masculine comedy; and one of the characters, as well as one of the actors, is a natural comedian.

* * *

That is the commonest of the ancient troubles: giving a cheerful, harmless theatre prank a churlish reception. But "Seagulls Over Sorrento" involves one of the other Broadway troubles, which is the old one of trying to appreciate a minor British comedy. Minor plays of every nationality lose character when they travel abroad.

Mr. Hastings is writing about a handful of British Navy sailors assigned to special, secret and dangerous duty at an experimental base in Scapa Flow. "Seagulls Over Sorrento" has been dubbed the British version of "Mister Roberts." There was plenty of theatre claptrap mixed up with the exuberance of "Mister Roberts." But the characters at least used rough language and treated each other rudely. They had the decency to be ashamed of their sentimentalities.

* * *

But the British seamen in "Seagulls Over Sorrento," like the British officers in "Journey's End," are sympathetic, brotherly men with a philosophical understanding of each other. They are kind to each other. This is the attitude that bewilders an American theatregoer. He is afraid that the author is pulling his leg. All the characters, save one, in "Seagulls Over Sorrento" are thoughtful, considerate, patient and basically good-humored; and Lieutenant Commander Redmond, D. S. O., D. S. C., R. N., is a jolly good fellow, next door to Santa Claus.

* * *

Now, all this is admirable on stage or on duty, but it does not seem real to an American who is accustomed to quaking and trembling when a soldier or sailor appears on the stage and to blushing whenever a soldier or sailor makes a sociable remark to a comrade. They do these things with more taste and less rancor in England.

* * *

"Seagulls Over Sorrento" has been competently staged by Mr. Hastings and Charles Bowden. Everything takes place inside an austere setting of a mess deck by Melvin Bourne. As a nimble conversationalist with a sense of humor, J. Pat O'Malley has the chief part, and he plays it with an informal, ingratiating comic style. As the petty tyrant with a malign attitude toward his inferiors, Leslie Nielsen gives an excellent performance, the hatred stiffening the correctness of his deportment.

* * *

John Randolph plays a hot-tempered but courageous seaman with considerable veracity. Guy Spaull as the commander, Bill Daniels as a modest minor officer, Walter Brooke as the most heroic and literate of the seamen and Mark Rydell, Bruce Hall and Rod Steiger complete an interesting cast of agreeable actors.

"Seagulls Over Sorrento" is a routine, loquacious comedy with a good heart but nothing much on its mind.

"SEAGULLS OVER SORRENTO"

Play by Hugh Hastings; staged by Mr. Hastings and Charles Bowden; settings by Melvin Bourne; costumes by Mildred Trebor; presented by Mr. Bowden and Philip Langner in association with Peter Cookson at the John Golden Theatre, September 11, 1952. The cast:

Able Seaman Badger.....J. Pat O'Malley
Able Seaman Sims.....Mark Rydell
Able Seaman McIntosh.....Bruce Hall
Able Seaman Turner.....John Randolph
Petty Officer Herbert.....Leslie Nielsen
Lt. Cmdr. Redmond.....Guy Spaull
Sub.-Lieut Granger.....Bill Daniels
Able Seaman Hudson.....Walter Brooke
Telegraphist.....Rod Steiger

Journal American

September 12, 1952

Theatre Season Off To a Middling Start

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE 1952-53 THEATRE SEASON got off to a rather middling start last night with the arrival at the John Golden Theatre of an item called "Seagulls Over Sorrento" by Hugh Hastings.

This comedy-drama dealing with the problems of a small unit of the British Royal Navy in peacetime has played with signal success for a couple of seasons in London and was tried out here, with the present neo-American cast, at the Westport Country Playhouse.

The response was such that the producers, Charles Bowden and Philip Langner, decided to bring it to Broadway in association with Pete Cookson. I doubt that they will be happy with the decision.

Trouble Two-Fold

THE TROUBLE seemed to be two-fold. Much of the humor and pathos depend upon an intimate knowledge of Royal Navy "types" which few of us possess; and the current cast, mostly American, fails to delineate these characters sufficiently to bring out the subtleties which, in England, apparently took the place of a strong plot. For the story itself is neither new nor notable.

A handful of British seamen find themselves unexpectedly thrown together on an island experimental station off the coast of Scotland. It is dangerous duty, something to do with a radar warhead for torpedoes, and all the usual characters are present.

There is the old career enlisted man, the callow youth (a foundling), the gay renegade with the heart of gold, the sensitive philosopher, the silent soul with a secret sorrow, the bullying petty officer and the teddibly fair and square junior "leftenant."

Tense situations develop from the unbelievable cruelty of the petty officer, the untimely demise of the sensitive scientist and the long hassle over who will draw the dangerous mission.

In the course of this there are long lulls, occasional moments of moving dialogue, quite a few honest laughs, and some excitement. But I didn't think it added up to a fulfilling evening.

Strive Manfully

J. PAT O'MALLEY was completely competent in the big role of the old veteran, but I didn't think any of his fellow workers quite came off. There has never been such an absurd Chief in any Navy as that portrayed by Leslie Nielsen, and John Randolph as the dissolute saint was about as British as a hot dog.

This is not said to the discredit of these or any other member of the cast. They strove manfully, but as Americans they were unable to bring striking characterizations out of a pedestrian play about British seamen. And I cannot, in honesty, say they were greatly aided by the direction of Hastings and Bowden, both of whom are credited with same.

Daily Mirror

September 12, 1952

'Seagulls' Packed With Heart and Hilarity

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The official opening of the theatrical season of 1952-53 last evening reminded us somewhat of an experience the small fry had had earlier in the week: the first day of school. We greeted fellow first-nighters and aisle-sitters, and organized our minds for the semester ahead. We suspect that most of us at the John Golden Theatre had a more enjoyable time of it than our juniors.

The new season preemed with "Seagulls Over Sorrento," a salty comedy by Hugh Hastings that has been delighting Londoners for nearly two years. Charles Bowden, Philip Langner and Peter Cookson tuned up the American version for Broadway recently at the Westport (Conn.) County Playhouse, where it also pleased the customers.

"Seagulls" will probably be likened to our own "Mister Roberts" and "Stalag 17." In our opinion, it is more like the latter in idea and quality. It has to do with British seamen who have volunteered for hazardous experiments on a bleak base off the Scottish coast. They have their minor and major trials and tribulations, heartbreaks and triumphs.

We found most of the characters to be consistently interesting and amusing. Hastings has etched them with high spirits and admirable perception. The author also has teamed with co-producer Bowden to direct the dramatic fun-fest with welcome robustiousness. For too long our stagers have been emphasizing restraint at the expense of vitality and zest.

They have an excellent cast with which to work. J. Pat O'Malley, Mark Rydell, Bruce Hall, John Randolph and Rod Steiger have hilarious and moving moments as five venturesome tars. They are all so outstanding in their individual ways that it is perhaps ungracious to single out O'Malley for special kudos. But it is he who really sparks the evening. Guy Spaull, Walter Brooke, Bill Daniels and Leslie Nielsen are first-rate in the less showy roles.

Melvin Bourne and Mildred Trebor have combined on the designing of an atmospheric set and costumes. The latter are uniforms, of course.

It is regrettable that Britain's "Seagulls" must stand comparison with America's "Mister Roberts" and "Stalag 17," since their patterns are so familar. We think that audience opinions may be divided. Those who like the newcomer will like it a lot, and even those who take it in stride won't register any strong dissent.

Personally, we had a good time. We found the new arrival packed with heart and hilarity. We make no excuses in recommending it to you. It was good to laugh again, to feel again, in the theatre. That a majority of the first-nighters shared our enthusiasm for "Seagulls" was attested by their lusty applause. Many of them remained after the final curtain to cheer.

Oh yes, until a more engaging performance comes along, we are citing Pat O'Malley for at least one of the numerous acting awards that will be distributed next semester. And it's going to take a lot to top him.

New York World-Telegram and The ~~Evening~~ Sun

September 12, 1952

London's 'Seagulls' Alight in New York

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The new Broadway season opened last night with the English comedy "Seagulls Over Sorrento," whose London playing time is currently measured in years.

It is unsophisticated adventure, told in a straightforward manner that agreeably borders on the innocent. It relies more on narrative than on character to make its points.

There is simple gallantry in this story of the peace time British Navy, but it avoids false heroics. Always diverting, it is not stirring or touching to a degree that suggests importance, nor has it the faintest pretensions to being anything but pure entertainment.

Gripes and Grumbler.

In Scapa Flow, on an island near Scotland, several Able Seamen are sent to take part in some secret tests involving radar and torpedoes. Rather a ringleader is talkative Badger, who becomes the grumbling cook. Sprog is a youngster from an orphan home, and Haggis a bitter Scotsman whose wife has lost her mind.

Lofty is the hearty type, friendly and a trap for trouble, which he finds in the person of the Petty Officer.

A slightly mysterious expert joins them, and is shortly killed by his experiments. Eventually the men must draw lots to carry out a final big mission, and coincidentally with its completion they find a revenge on the Petty Officer who has made them miserable.

The humor of the show springs largely from the grousing and insults of the lonely, frightened men. Inevitably, too, it is incited by their missing the companionship of women.

You Can Plan to Laugh.

In front of a less self-conscious audience than last night's seasonal premiere, the play will unquestionably ride at a faster, funnier pace. Lots of the jokes are bawdy, but they are never snide. You have to go to this one planning to laugh, not judge, in order to really enjoy it.

The cast is infinitely suitable, to a man. Although most of the actors are American, they manage the varying English accents with great aplomb.

The longest assignment is J. Pat O'Malley's, as the talkative cook. He is highly successful at setting a good-natured tone for the show, retaining the same bluff, self-preserving manner throughout, while the others either enjoy life or blow their tops.

John Randolph is excellent as the troublous Lofty, who turns out to be the craftiest hero of the crowd, and Walter Brooke conveys the right wistful ease as the radar expert. A couple of further stalwarts through the play are Bruce Hall as the gloomy Scot, and Mark Rydell as the orphan whose love of music makes the men decide he must be an "Eytie," or at any rate a Latin.

DAILY NEWS

September 12, 1952

'Seagulls Over Sorrento' Opens New Stage Season Quite Mildly

By JOHN CHAPMAN

It was a balmy night last night on the shores of W. 45th St., and the first play of the season was being acted at the John Golden Theatre. Outside, the charity ladies had returned as faithfully as the swallows come back to the Mission of San Juan Capistrano, holding out their tin-bottomed coffee containers and uttering their sad cries of "Please help the six-toed children." Inside, seagulls could be heard complaining on a sound track as "Seagulls Over Sorrento" had its opening. It was a balmy night for a mild play.

"Seagulls Over Sorrento," by Hugh Hastings, is an overexpanded sketch of life and character in the postwar British Navy. As a sketch it would have the good qualities of lively dialog and salty personalities. As a play it dissipates these qualities by overextending them and by not adding to them anything much in the way of a plot. There are only three events in the comedy. A petty officer gets knocked down by a rating, or common sailor, and this does happen onstage but is an anticlimax. The other two events, both explosions of a secret weapon, occur offstage and are of less than passing interest.

J. Pat O'Malley Night.

I suppose the best of "Seagulls